

# OPINION, DIALOGUE, REVIEW

## The new ILO report on child labour: a success story, or the ILO still at a loss?

**MANFRED LIEBEL**

Technische Universität Berlin

Mailing address:

Manfred Liebel

Faculty 1: Humanities,

Technische Universität Berlin,

Franklinstrasse 28/29, Sekr. FR 3-7,

D-10785 Berlin, Germany.

[email: mliebel@ina-fu.org]

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With this year's Global Report on Child Labour<sup>1</sup> the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopts a stance of victory. With confidence and pride, it announces that 'the worldwide movement against child labour' led by the ILO itself has brought 'the end of child labour – within reach'. However, no convincing proof is given for this surprising assertion. The numerous illogicalities contained in the report are, rather, calculated to create the impression that the ILO no longer has an idea – or still has none – of how the fight against child labour is to be continued.

For at least three decades, the ILO has been pursuing the aim of ensuring that no child anywhere in the world should work any more. Although the ILO identified child labour as a problem at the time of its foundation, in 1919, it is only from the 1970s onwards that it has paid continuous and increasing attention to the problem. In 1973, the ILO Convention No. 138 was adopted, which laid down a minimum age for commencing gainful employment; but in the beginning it was only ratified by a few states in the 'Third World', and proved to be a blunt instrument. In the early 1990s, on the initiative of the then German Federal Minister of Labour, Norbert Blüm, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) was set up, which was regulated by law, beyond the field of matters. The programme was to set in motion concrete programmes of action, and is still regarded as the ILO's flagship. Finally, in 1999, with the ILO Convention No. 182, a further instrument was created, which was to direct efforts towards abolishing child labour in its 'worst forms'. The new convention was seen as the beginning of the definitive abolishment of child labour, as provided for in Convention No. 138. Up to the present, for the ILO,

economic growth and the enforcement of school attendance have remained magic formulas with the aid of which children are to be banished from the economic arena.

### **Doubtful statistics**

The ILO, in its current report, states in support of its confident announcement of the impending end of child labour the statement that in the past four years the worldwide number of economically active children has decreased by 11 percent, and the number of children in hazardous work, by 26 percent. This means that there are no fewer than 89 percent still to go before the proclaimed overall disappearance of child labour is reached, and in the case of child labour classified as hazardous, there is still 74 percent to go. Accordingly, in its plan of action, the ILO also only proclaims the goal of abolishing the 'worst forms' of child labour over the next 10 years, while for other forms of child labour, no chronological targets are given at all. It looks as though the report is meant to kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, to give the public (and, apparently, also the governments, employers' associations and trades unions, which form the three 'pillars' of the ILO) a picture of its tireless and ever more successful efforts, and on the other hand, not to depart too far from realistic statements – with the consequence that both appear unconvincing.

But even the figures themselves do not convince. They are based both on questionable categories and on inadequate sources and methods of measurement. The broadest definition of the ILO refers to the so-called economic activity of children. This is to be understood as 'productive activities undertaken by children, whether for the market or not, paid or unpaid, for a few hours or full time, on a casual or regular basis, legal or illegal' (para. 20). A child is considered as economically active if she or he works 'for at least one hour on any day during a seven-day reference period' (para. 20). Explicitly excluded are domestic and school chores. Even though this definition of economic activity includes work of which outcomes are not intended for the market, all activities that do not serve the 'economic creation of value' are excluded, no matter whether they are vitally important or not (e.g. work in and for the home of the child's own family, or the creation of products for the child's own support).

The ILO speaks of child labour and demands political measures only with regard to activities that are forbidden according to the ILO Conventions Nos 138 and 182. According to this, children over 12 years of age who only perform permitted light work for a few hours a week, and children over 15 whose work is not classified as 'hazardous', do not perform 'child labour', or are not designated as 'child labourers'. According to the ILO, child labour is a strictly legal category, and thus is defined by political or legal guidelines. These are implicitly assumed to be 'sensible' and 'in the best interests of the children'. This also applies to children involved in so-called hazardous work. This category

also results from the legal postulates of the ILO conventions, particularly Convention No. 182.

On the basis of these categories, the ILO arrives at the estimate that in the year 2004 there were 317 million 'economically active' children between 5 and 17 years of age, 218 million of whom are regarded as 'child labourers'. According to the ILO, of the latter, 126 million were involved in hazardous work. The corresponding numbers for the more restricted age group of 5–14 years are 191 million economically active children, 166 million 'child labourers' and 74 million children performing 'hazardous work' (para. 24). Following the definitions of the ILO, only a fraction of the working children is recorded, and the assumptions concerning the reduction of child labour can be regarded as largely arbitrary as well.

### **A lack of empirical proof**

Apart from the problematic character of the categories, the question should be raised as to what recording methods the data are based on and what problems arose in practice during the cross-national worldwide survey, using unified criteria. On closer inspection, it appears that the report is based on a variety of sources that do not employ comparable statistical concepts. Furthermore, the data base is very narrow. The figures given for 'economically active children' for 2004 are based on those for only 31 countries, and are mostly dated to the year 2000.

Nor do the data on which the report is based permit any statement as to whether the extent of child labour declined between 2000 and 2004. First, the data used refer only to 17 countries, for two different years. In some cases, these figures relate to such short a period of time that no trend can be extrapolated from them for this reason alone. Thus, for example, the statistics for Kenya relate to the years 1999 and 2000. Second, almost all statements referring to trends are based on data for 1998 or earlier years. The estimates for 2004 are based predominantly on data that (at best) reflect the situation in the year 2000. Thus, for instance, the only figures relating to India refer to 1994 and 1999/2000, thus permitting no conclusions as to the period 2000–4. Only for Brazil does the period covered (with data for 1998 and 2003) approximate to the period 2000–4.

The report argues that the number of economically active children has declined within the past four years, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, by no less than two-thirds (para. 29). In view of such bold statements, those aware of the situation in Latin America can only shake their heads in disbelief. Here are some examples. According to a report in the Paraguayan daily *ABC*, the local UNICEF office pointed out in May 2006 that the number of 'economically active children' in the previous four years had grown by 56,500. Also in May 2006, the Argentinian Ministry of Labour concluded from a survey of its own that the number of working children had risen 'to an alarming extent' throughout the country.

From a report by the *terre des hommes* Andean office, one can draw the conclusion that the data were tailored in order to make measures to combat child labour appear in a better light. According to the National Statistical Institute of Bolivia, for example, the number of working children rose continuously between 1992 and 1998 from 500,000 to 800,000, that is, by 62 percent, while, strangely enough, in the year 2005 the number declined to 350,000, i.e. by 56 percent. Preceding this, the evaluation methods were coordinated with international institutions. In many other countries, the experience of NGOs and of the movements of working children also contradict the ILO's declarations of success; it must also be taken into consideration that many working children were forced to move from public spaces in city centres towards urban peripheries and non-public areas. The measures undertaken by the ILO are no strangers to this evolution.

Numerous other reports of successes are not supported empirically. Thus the ILO report states: 'In country after country the establishment of universal schooling up to the age of 14 has signalled the effective demise of child labour' (para. 36). In the footnote to this statement, however, only one single study from one country (India) is cited, which also dates from 1991.

The ILO report not only lacks credibility, but also analytical constancy. The 'German NGO Forum on Child Labour' rightly criticizes the fact that the ILO report 'does not examine what effects globalisation processes and economic-policy strategies such as liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation have on child labour' (press release, 4 May 2006). In nebulous words, the ILO report merely alleges the will to 'fair globalisation' without naming the necessary shift in worldwide power ratios.

### **Construction of contrasts between children and young people**

One main problem with the ILO report is that its definition of child labour – as in previous reports and comments – even considering the distinctions made, only permits a categorically negative evaluation. Children's work, as understood by the ILO, is considered incompatible with (school) education and is seen primarily as a 'development obstacle' – particularly to economic growth and poverty reduction. In this way the perspective is not only limited to a focus on the negative aspects of children's work, but also many essential activities as well as those accepted by children are not taken into consideration in the statistical data and strategic considerations of the ILO.

Work and education are considered, where children are concerned, as incompatible antagonisms. Although an improvement in the quality of educational institutions is repeatedly demanded and, at one point, there is even talk of a 'child-friendly school', no thought is wasted on how schools could be reconciled with the living conditions of working children. Concrete and often successful approaches of 'non-formal education' with working children whose experiences are taken seriously are discredited as 'second-class education', or

even branded as ‘a parallel system competing against the formal education system’ (para. 266). The report leaves the impression that the ILO has never heard of educational concepts and progressive schools that aim at linking learning with work experience and which could pose a promising alternative, especially for working children.

The report appears to construct illusory contrasts between working children on the one hand and unemployed young people and adults on the other hand. As if, beyond the ILO conventions, there was a clearly definable dividing line between the two age groups, the work of children is made responsible for young people not finding jobs. While ‘decent work’ is proposed as a solution to the problems of the latter, working children are sweepingly alleged neither to learn anything, nor to obtain any professional qualifications while working. This assumed contradiction, which the ILO calls a ‘cruel irony’ (para. 283), could pass as a lack of logical thinking. However, the perfidy becomes evident when labour unions are advised to set foot in the ‘informal sector’, since it is here that most children can be found, i.e. replaced. The ILO sees in this ‘the reservoir of future membership’ (para. 319) – at the expense of working children.

### **Primary interest in human capital**

Indulgent commentators give the ILO report credit for the fact that, for the first time, a ‘perspective from children’s rights’ has been adopted, and think they can see signs that the ILO is departing cautiously from the absolute goal of abolishing all child labour, in order to concentrate on the fight against the exploitation of children and the ‘worst forms of child labour’. It cannot be ignored that a number of ILO experts have in recent years gained insight that their measures can only be successful if they do not insist on outdated ‘abolitionist’ dogmas, and include the affected children and their families in the planning. Some IPEC projects, which are carried out together with experienced NGOs, take account of the varying local conditions, and sometimes of proposals coming from outside, and prefer a cautious, gradual process. This may be one reason why the hitherto relatively independently acting IPEC programme has been fettered again by the ILO bureaucracy, and downgraded to a subdepartment.

Even if a number of indications of inadequacies in measures undertaken hitherto are due to the self-doubts of some ILO experts, the impression predominates that those responsible for the policy and the report of the ILO have not become any more sensitive to the concrete hardships, needs and expectations of the working children. They do not tire, it is true, to stress the hazards of work for the children, but it apparently continues to be in the foreground of their interest that child labour ‘impoverishes and even destroys the human capital that is necessary for the economy to grow in the future’ (para. 7). Hence it is no wonder that the flowery adjurations of the ‘rights’ and ‘participation’ of

children do not lead to concrete proposals of dialogue and collaboration. Children are only invited to participate under the condition that they support 'child labour efforts' (para. 345) in the sense of eradicating child labour. In the whole report, there is hardly a trace of reflection about the frequently negative effects that coincide with measures against child labour for the children themselves. Different concepts of appropriate strategies to improve the situation of working children are discounted as 'danger of factionalism' (para. 350). The movements of working children might be mentioned, but there is no mention of their experiences, demands or suggestions.<sup>2</sup>

The new Report on Child Labour is a further piece of evidence that the ILO is deaf to the concrete interests and needs of working children. Instead of preaching the elimination of child labour – currently step by step – the ILO should be recommended to ask exactly what could help to improve the situation of these children – while actually listening to working children and their organizations, and beginning a serious dialogue marked by mutual respect.

## Notes

1. International Labour Office (2006) *The End of Child Labour: Within Reach. Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*. Geneva.
2. Further information can be obtained on the following internet sites: [www.workingchild.org](http://www.workingchild.org) (English), [www.enda.sn/eja](http://www.enda.sn/eja) (English and French), [www.ifejants.org](http://www.ifejants.org) (Spanish), [www.pronats.de](http://www.pronats.de) (German), as well as the books: Liebel, M., *A Will of Their Own: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Working Children* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004) and Hungerland, B., Liebel, M., Milne, B. and Wihstutz, A. (eds), *Working to Be Someone: Child Focused Research and Practice with Working Children* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2007).

